


DIRTY JOBS: COAST GUARD CUTTER JUNIPER

Newport Life

FALL 2008

MAGAZINE

A woman with sunglasses on her head, wearing a black sleeveless dress and black and white patterned high-heeled sandals, is posing next to a vintage biplane. She is smiling and touching the wing of the plane. The plane is white with red and black accents. The background is a clear blue sky.

HAVE
STYLE
WILL
TRAVEL

*23 Pages of
First-Class Fall Fashions*

Apple-Picking For All Ages

*Ophelia Sessions
Inspire Teenage Girls*

PLUS
Real Estate • Dining • Social Scene

\$3.95 US/\$4.95 Canada
NewportLifeMagazine.com



Printed in Canada

A large yellow crane is mounted on the deck of a white ship. It is lifting a large, red, cylindrical buoy that has a black base. Several crew members wearing hard hats and safety vests are on the deck, some near the crane and others further back. The ship is on the water, and the sky is clear. The text "BUOY," is overlaid in large, bold, yellow letters.

BUOY,

OH BUOY

A Newport-based crew is responsible for the upkeep of 222 floating beacons from Cape Cod to the Big Apple.



Seaman Juan Reyes of Providence powered 40,000 pounds of lift in the massive crane he was operating on the bow of the Coast Guard Cutter *Juniper*, but the buoy he was trying to lift was not moving. The 12,000-pound beacon was attached by a 100-foot steel chain to a concrete block weighing 20,000 pounds. Appropriately called a “sinker,” it was literally stuck in the mud at the bottom of the Pollock Rip Channel at the eastern entrance to Nantucket Sound. “We’ll use the ship’s power to break it free,” says 1st Lt. Mike Tomasi of Middletown, chief warrant officer and the deck department head, who was assisting Reyes.

The main mission of the cutter *Juniper*, whose homeport is Newport, is maintaining 222 buoys, 175 of which are lit, from Cape Cod to New York City. Pounded by Nor’easters and heavy seas, buoys can become “discrepant” as the crew says. They can break free of their chains and rove off course. Their lights can go out or when their compartments become flooded, the buoys sit too low in the water and can become a navigation hazard.

Juniper was about 10 miles offshore from Chatham, Cape Cod, last August when the crew tried to extract this stubborn buoy. With two 3,100 horsepower Caterpillar engines in the hull, Lt. Junior Grade Ashley Crouch of Newport was surprised it was taking this much effort. “I’ve never seen so much trouble bringing a buoy on board,” she says as it was yanked from its muddy terrain and landed on *Juniper*’s deck.

The U.S. Navy’s authority in Newport predicated the *Juniper*’s presence here, and while their responsibilities are widespread and challenging, the Coast Guard ships at Naval Station Newport are the forgotten sisters. Since the naval ships have a stronger visual power on the waterfront, and in many cases are physically larger than the Coast Guard vessels, mariners may not

recognize the work these Coast Guardsmen and women do to preserve their safety on local waters. However, these temporary Aquidneck Island crewmembers have made a great sacrifice to do this work here, and it is those stories that prove their dedication to this cause.

• • •

The 225-foot, black-hulled *Juniper* is one of the larger buoy tenders in the Coast Guard fleet, but, “in the middle of the ocean, it feels small,” says Dillon Smith, a crewmember from Middletown. With the white sands and pale green brush of Cape Cod’s Monomoy Island on the horizon, the ship’s deck is a pleasant place on a hot August day. Dressed in overalls, steel-toed boots, heavy gloves, hard hats and safety glasses, the deck crew had little time to enjoy the ambiance, however, because as soon as a buoy lands on deck, they begin scraping off barnacles, black mussels and seaweed with steel blades. It’s hot, dirty work, but it is worse in the winter, when they must wear insulated gear. “But it’s still cold,” says Senior Chief Kathleen McSweeney



FACING PAGE The Aquidneck Island-based crew aboard Coast Guard Cutter *Juniper* (above) tends more than 200 buoys along the northeast coast, including this one near Chatham, Cape Cod, which weighs 12,000 pounds.

of Tiverton. “In a cold wind, it feels like you are not wearing anything.”

McSweeney, a 16-year member of the Coast Guard, is the boatswain in charge of the deck crew. After the 32-foot-high buoy is secured on deck, she usually scrambles to the top and begins unscrewing the apparatus of six light bulbs that rotate as each bulb burns out. Above the light enclosure is a solar panel that faces upward into the sky, ready to be dumped on by perching sea gulls, which hinders its operation. The solar panel charges a battery in a sealed compartment in the buoy that can get flooded, which also can douse the light. This whole set-up is problematic, which is why *Juniper* is converting the buoys to a newer, less-sensitive LED technology.

McSweeney and her crewmates replace the old apparatus with a small metal box with light-emitting diodes that is bolted to the top of the buoy. The battery is inside this waterproof box. These LEDs have small vertical solar panels on all four sides that are not easily obstructed or damaged, and also withstand intense vibration. “We had a buoy

OTHER COAST GUARD SHIPS THAT CALL NEWPORT HOME

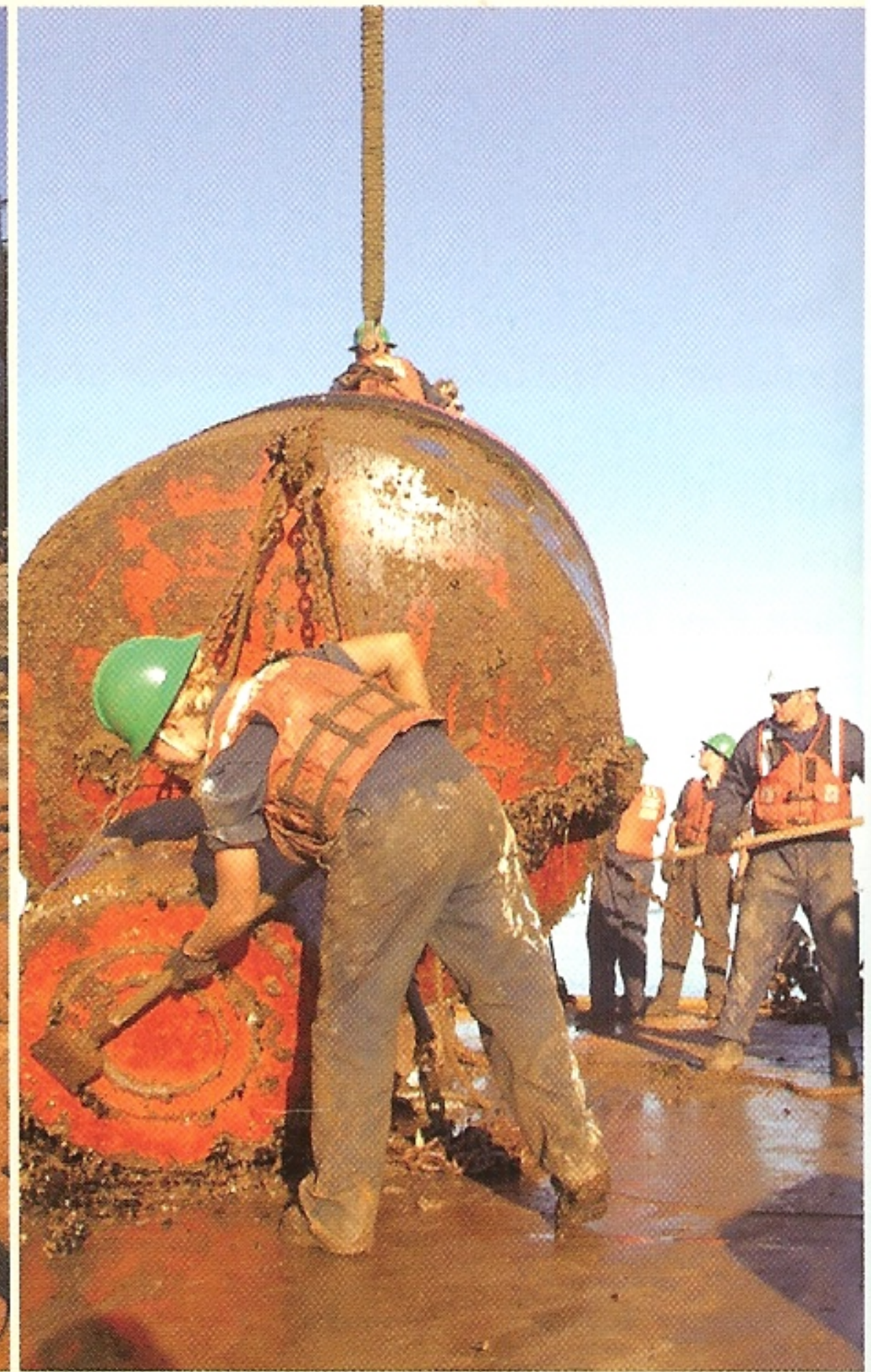
Cutter *Willow* tends buoys north of Cape Cod to the Canadian border.

Cutter *Tigershark*, an 87-foot patrol boat with a crew of 10, is stationed at Goat Island.

The Coast Guard station at Castle Hill operates smaller boats in the harbor and close to shore.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE A 32-foot buoy and its 20,000-pound concrete weight is pulled aboard the USCGC Cutter *Juniper*, where the LED solar panel and the entire exterior are scraped free of barnacles, seaweed and bird droppings. Senior Chief Kathleen McSweeney of Tiverton, a 16-year Coast Guardswoman, climbs on the buoy to replace batteries and complete other maintenance.



with an LED light that sunk on us," says Lt. Commander Rick Wester of Middletown, *Juniper's* captain. "When we brought it up 36 hours later, the light was still flashing."

After buoys have been in the water for six years, they are taken to the Coast Guard depot in South Weymouth, Massachusetts, where they are sandblasted, painted and refitted with a new LED box. Within those six years, the buoys are inspected at least every three years, and serviced in between if there are problems.

• • •

Any time the ship leaves Newport, *Juniper's* crew has more to keep it busy than buoy tending, which only occupies half its time. On this trip in August, crewmembers left Newport on Sunday night and by Tuesday had boarded five fishing vessels to check for compliance with fishing and safety regulations. In the winter, the ship handles ice-breaking chores in the harbors. The ship also has a built-in spilled-oil recovery system and assists the white-hulled Coast Guard ships that conduct search-and-rescue missions.

"The fact we do so many missions keeps them all fun," says Lt. Junior Grade Jeanette Killen, the navigation deck operations officer. Originally from Wyoming, Killen now lives on Broadway in Newport. After she graduated from the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut, in 2005, Newport was one of her top choices for assignment. "My last boat was in Sheboygan, Michigan, so it's a big contrast to be in Newport. There is so much to do here. I've met so many great people, and I love the seafood."

Killen plots the track lines as *Juniper* moves up and down the East Coast, or into the Great Lakes for ice-breaking missions. "If I put a track line over shallow water, I put all of us in danger," she says. "It's a big responsibility." It's a lot of pressure for one of four female officers aboard, and one of 10 enlisted females, out of 38 total crew. She has no complaints about her job, though, and says, "I can't believe what I get to do every day."

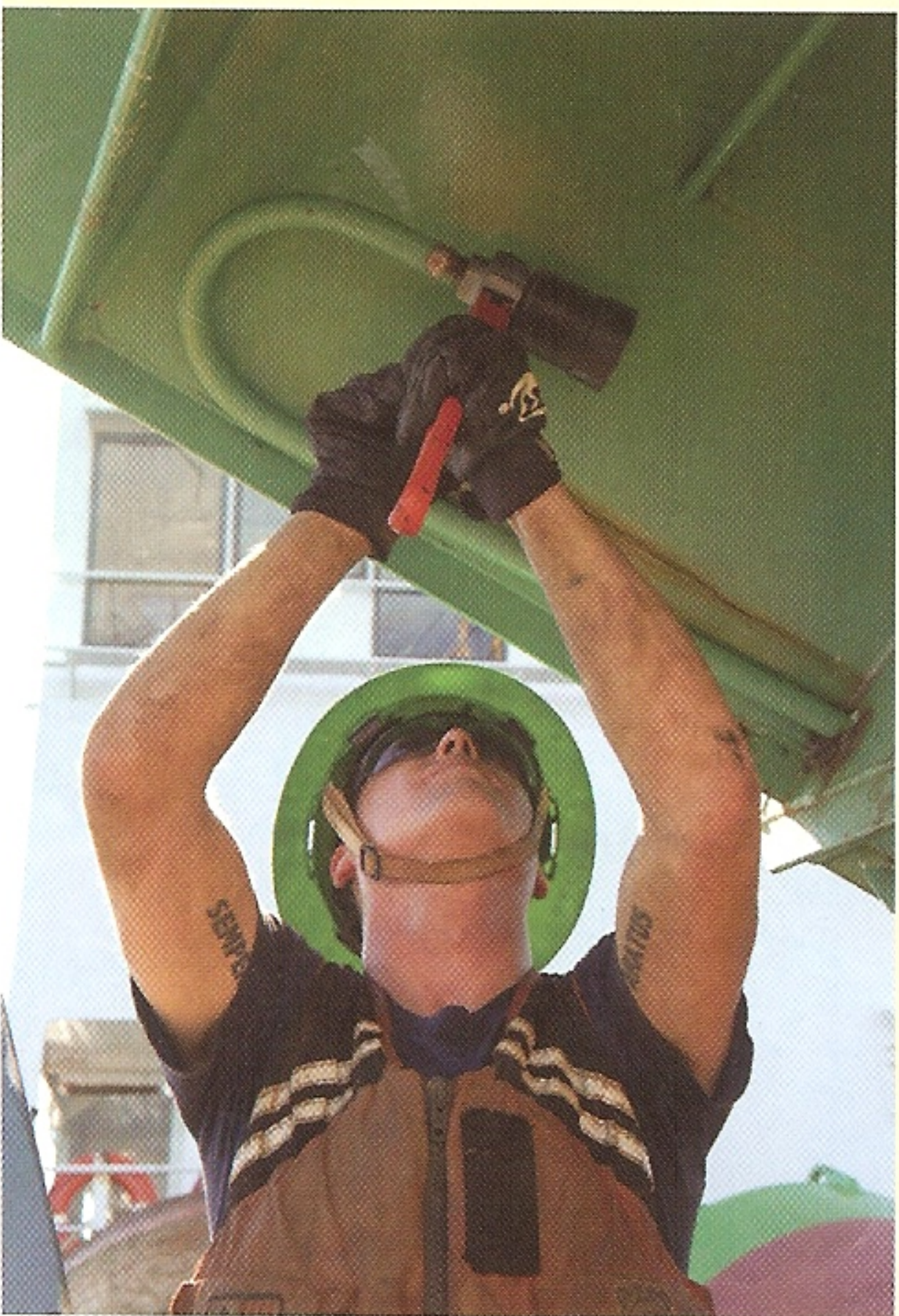
Immigration, search and rescue and enforcement of ocean regulations are also on *Juniper's* to-do list. From mid-October to before Thanksgiving, the crew was assigned to the Caribbean, off Key West, where the cutter served as a holding platform for illegal immigrants. Wester has experience with this type of migrant

"I can't believe what I get to do every day."

LT. JUNIOR GRADE JEANNETTE KILLEN
NAVIGATION DECK OPERATIONS OFFICER



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Seaman Apprentice Melissa Murch of Maine takes a break from her work on *Juniper's* deck. Crewman Dillon Smith enjoys the view from *Juniper's* deck. Lt. Junior Grade Jeannette Killen (right) of Newport steers the 225-foot *Juniper* while Capt. Rick Wester of Middletown oversees the work on deck. Seaman Apprentice Peter Hardy completes scheduled maintenance.



interdiction. He was assigned to the cutter *Escape* in 1994, when U.S. patrol boats picked up about 60,000 people, most of them Haitians or Cubans. At one time, *Escape* had 400 immigrants on board who were taken to the U.S. detainment camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Buoy-tending trips are usually one- or two-week missions, and *Juniper's* crew returned to Newport before Thanksgiving to spend the holidays with their families. Trips like that might seem unbearable for some crew, while others say the longer trips make homecoming that much sweeter.

Machinery Technician 1st Class James Cashin, 31, says when the ship is in Newport, he has a five-minute commute to his home in Middletown that he shares with his wife, Jennifer, son Kyle, 10, and daughter Andrea, 7. The longer trips away are more difficult for Cashin. "It's tougher on my wife than on the kids," says the 12-year Coast Guardsman. "She becomes a single parent, with all the work and responsibilities. The kids miss me, but they're used to it. I've been doing this their whole lives."

First Lt. Tomasi of Middletown, on *Juniper* nearly three years and on Newport Cutter *Ida Lewis* from 2002 through 2004, says his children also suffer when he is away. He and his wife Linda have two children, Nathan, 7, and Emily, almost 6. "In November, I'll miss my daughter's birthday," he says. "We celebrate the birthdays before or after the trips, seldom right on the day of the birthday. Sometimes, I miss them altogether."



Now that *Juniper* has converted 75 percent of the buoys in her territory to LED technology, the ship and her crew will be focusing more rigorously on immigrant interdiction, navigation and fisheries enforcement. Though those duties will take them all further away from home, it's a small sacrifice when making local waters safer is their ultimate reward. Capt. Wester says that by September, the ship will have logged more than 2,100 miles underway since last year, and when they return home from shorter local missions this fall, firefighting and ship flood training will begin anew.

Juniper's work seems never to be done, and Wester says they look forward to other challenges. "We keep very busy, but all the work we do gives us a sense of accomplishment." ❖